

Did the Romans buy country life?

Edward Bispham

Two recent events which made the headlines suggest that an increasing gulf separates town and country, or, to put it another way, the civilized and primitive worlds. Firstly, the 'Countryside March' saw tens of thousands of rural folk marching into central London, complaining that the Government misunderstood them. Secondly, the destructive fires in the Amazon: meteorologists predicted continued drought, but local authorities called on two shamans from the Uanamani tribe, one of the most isolated in Amazonia, to summon rain. They did, and it came. Both events seem to speak to us of a world, and a way of life, with which most of us have lost touch. It may be some comfort to know that our Roman counterparts were as confused as we are.

'Blessed is he, who, far from business deals, like the ancient race of mortal men, works his ancestral fields with his oxen ...' (Horace, Epodes 2.1-3).

Horace puts these words into the mouth of Altius, a money-lender. In the course of the poem, Altius describes the new life he is about to take up as a farmer, full of simple contentment and piety. For example: *'It's pleasant to lie now beneath an ancient oak, now in clinging grass: meanwhile the waters slip by in the deep streams, birds coo in the woods, and springs run with chattering waters, inviting gentle slumbers.'* At the end of the poem, however, we read: *'when he had spoken these words, Altius the money-lender, on the very point of becoming a rustic, called in all his money on the Ides [the day for calling in debts]; on the first of next month he's looking to lend it out again'.* Why does Altius suddenly give up on his country dream? To answer this question we must look more closely at Roman writers' attitudes to the countryside.

Back to rustics

While the loving descriptions of the countryside common in ancient poetry look authentic, and often involve farmers or shepherds (the terms 'bucolic' or 'pastoral', used to describe such poetry, are derived from Greek or Latin words to do with shepherding), we must remember that simple subjects do not necessarily mean simple poems. Pastoral poetry is clever and complex. It was written by educated men for a sophisticated city audience, not for shepherds. Consequently it reflected urban views of the countryside, and city misunderstandings. Such complications are common: for 'townies' fox-hunting is a cruel sport; farmers will reply that foxes have to be kept down, and that this is the best way. It's not easy to see which point of view is right, probably because both are. What is clear is that today, as in ancient Rome, city dwellers view the countryside in their own particular way.

By the time of the first emperor, Augustus (27 B.C.-A.D. 14), Rome was undisputed mistress of the world, the largest, richest, most luxurious city known to man. Romans believed that their dominance was decreed by destiny: they were especially favoured by the gods, and deserved that favour by their conspicuous piety. This piety was itself part of the simple and austere life which the early Romans had lived. It was thought that during her rise to greatness, Rome had been a simple society of peasant farmers who doubled as tough warriors. The pious, austere soldier-farmer was the typical 'traditional' Roman. He represented what the Romans felt made them a distinct and superior people.

But traditional Roman culture found rivals. Rome's growing empire brought new fashions to Rome, and before long the trendy and the traditional were locked in combat. Rome entered a prolonged identity crisis, unwilling either to abandon her traditional image, or to be forward looking and dynamic (rather like Tony Blair's 'Cool Britannia'). Some felt that what had made Rome special was being diluted by foreign influences. Greek-style luxury must inevitably corrupt and possibly destroy Rome: the first century B.C. saw a series of disastrous civil wars which nearly did ruin everything. Augustus brought peace and stability, but the scars ran deep: abandoning the traditional way of life, according to Horace and others, had been the cause of the disaster. Much of Augustus' work was a sort of 'Back to Basics' campaign. The values of olden-day Rome became important again.

Roman society looked to older, simpler, more rustic ways in order to rediscover itself, and to seek a cure for the ills that had nearly destroyed it. Hence, one difficulty in Roman views about the countryside. Urban Romans were not interested in the countryside for itself, but because of their recent history. It was a kind of escapism, which envisaged an ideal rusticity, not a real one. The way in which the Romantic movement arose against the backdrop of the industrial revolution in Europe provides a useful parallel.

A second, related, problem is the way Roman poets wrote about the countryside. They used Greek, not Roman, literary models. Horace was well aware of this: '*Captive Greece won over her rough conqueror, and brought arts into rural Latium*' is how he puts it (*Epistles* 2.1. 156–7); and he was not alone in using non-traditional poetry to present traditionalist content. Another step away from reality towards idealism.

City Life: Bad but Nice?

When Roman writers praise the countryside, they usually contrast it with the city. There luxury was displayed, and there corruption was to be found. The following example is from Virgil's *Georgics* (2. 458–71)

'Greatly fortunate, if they should know their blessings, are the farmers! For them, far from discordant arms, the earth most just pours out from the soil an easy sustenance. What if the lofty town house with proud doorways does not vomit forth from every part of the building a vast wave of morning callers, and they do not gape at door jambs variegated with beautiful tortoise-shell, clothes embroidered with gold, or Corinthian bronzes, and white wool is not stained with Assyrian poisons; nor the usefulness of clear olive-oil spoilt with cinnamon; but safe rest and a life ignorant of deception are not lacking, a life rich in varied produce, and rest in broad acres, caves and living lakes, cool Tempe, the lowing of cows and soft sleep beneath a tree.'

Here we see a theme common in writing about the countryside: the Golden Age. Traditional values, and virtues, which are conspicuous by their absence from the city, belong far away from it, in the country. They also belong in the past (things are never as good as they used to be, in the old days children could play unsupervised, you could leave your front door unlocked, and so on). Roman authors were never quite sure whether the

Golden Age was 'soft' (a life of ease catered for by nature), or 'hard' (a life of toil and virtuous simplicity); but they all imagine the distant Golden Age and the distant countryside as more or less interchangeable concepts. Thus, deliberate idealization is added to subconscious escapism.

In the *Politics* Aristotle famously defined man as a 'political animal'. By this he meant 'an animal which lives in a *polis*', that is, a city. The city was a physical sign of the sense of community which distinguished men from animals. Life lived in cities was what made Greek and Roman civilization different from others; the city was not just useful, but pleasant. It was clean and attractive; the countryside was brutal, dirty, and uncouth. When the city in question is Rome, all the amenities and pleasures of civilized life are there in abundance. Hence, amid the ambivalences of the *Georgics*, we find Virgil praising the eternal city: '*thus Rome became the most beautiful of things, and girded around her seven citadels with a single wall*' (2. 532-5).

Cicero has it both ways

So is the city good? Or is it bad? And what about the country-side? Pity poor Altius: with all these conflicting attitudes he can have hardly known whether he was coming or going. Poetic views of the countryside are clearly very complicated; another type of writing may help us to get another perspective on the problem. Roman law-court speeches were quite different from ours: witnesses and cross-examination played a less important part than the elaborate speeches with which prosecuting and defending counsel tried to convince the jury. Above all appeal was made to the emotions rather than to the facts. An important technique was to convince the jury that the character of the defendant was such that he could not have committed the crime of which he was accused. Two of Cicero's speeches illustrate this technique particularly well.

In the speech *In defence of Sextus Roscius of Ameria* the prosecutor had argued that Roscius, who was accused of killing his father, had been a wild and depraved figure, and that his father had for that reason kept him 'confined' on a country estate. This hands Cicero his opening on a plate: yes, Roscius spent all his time in the country, but everybody knows how simple and upright country folk are. Far from being confined, Roscius managed his father's estates; he had never come to Rome, and thus could not have fallen into degenerate and licentious ways. How could such a man possibly have killed his father?

'I myself know many men ... who of their own accord are enthusiastic about the study of agriculture, and who consider this rustic life, which you ... think ought to be an insult and a slur, to be highly respectable and very pleasant.' Finally, Cicero lays the blame at the door of the sinister ex-slave Chrysogonus, who has framed Roscius: the two are contrasted in terms which remove Chrysogonus' moral credentials: he lives in a swanky house on the Palatine Hill in Rome, which is decorated with, among other things, Corinthian vases (see also the passage of *Georgics* quoted above); as we know, luxury is the bed-fellow of evil-doing. Roscius was acquitted.

Some years later Cicero was defending Caelius Rufus, a former pupil, on charges of murder, and of attempting to poison his mistress Clodia (probably = Catullus' Lesbia). The prosecution picked on Caelius' wild youth in Rome, arguing that such a degraded individual was surely guilty. Cicero cannot deny that Caelius had been a party-animal, but paints his behaviour as youthful excess, to be forgiven by men of the world (such as the jury). More importantly, Cicero turns the idea of rural virtue/urban vice, which had saved Roscius, on its head. Now he suggests that the city is *good*: it has provided Caelius with an education which has made him sophisticated, learned, a good speaker, and thus a man who will be able to serve his country. Such a man should not be condemned, says Cicero, especially when others are much more likely to be guilty; not least the frightful Clodia.

So for Cicero, there are no moral labels ('good', 'bad') which automatically apply to either city or country. What makes one virtuous and the other unattractive is dictated not by any real characteristics, but by the needs of Cicero's client of the moment. The city and the country have good *and* bad sides: Cicero has to stress whichever aspect will help win the case: the opposition were playing the same game. So the label you apply depends on your viewpoint, and that is often dictated by the situation in which you find yourself.

So can we now explain Altius' decision not to escape to the countryside? On one level the answer is obvious: when it comes to the crunch, Altius cannot give up his lucrative urban profession. The countryside represents the past, and the Golden Age; as such, it is timeless. Altius is however trapped in an urban calendar where time is money. Business (which he initially desired to be far from) calls him back.

Altius is clearly meant to be a comic figure; but we are also meant to be laughing at ourselves when we laugh at him. We, the readers, are no better at escaping our own confusions than Altius. Just like him, we idealize the countryside, but won't leave the city for it, since reality cannot measure up to our ideals. The country is a nice place, as long as you don't have to live there. Horace is playing with the traditional notions of praise of the countryside, but he also pokes fun at the city-dwellers' view of nature. Like Altius, we want to have our cake and eat it. Think about it the next time you watch a wildlife programme on television.

Edward Bispham, who works on Roman Italy, taught for several years at the University of Edinburgh, and is now Tutor in Ancient History at Brasenose College, Oxford. He recently started cycling to work: he has not sold his car.